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ABSTRACT

This study examined parental strategies used with beginning readers, particularly how parents responded to children's miscues and what general admonitions they provided while listening to their children read. Subjects were 19 middle-class children (from 5 to 7 years old) and their parents. Each parent-child pair was visited at home and presented with four storybooks of ascending level of difficulty for beginning readers. Parents were instructed to help their child read the storybooks as they normally would; sessions were audiotaped and nonverbal behaviors, such as pointing to words or pictures, were noted. Next, parents helped children complete six colored worksheets containing items from the reading recognition subtest of the Peabody Individual Achievement Test-Revised (PIAT-R). Finally, parents and teachers completed a questionnaire designed to determine their approach to reading instruction at home. Analysis revealed that the majority of parents viewed reading as a bottom-up process, frequently helping their children over miscues by helping them sound out the miscued words. Parents also tended to use more context cues with children who showed poorer reading ability on the PIAT-R. No significant correlation was found between children's reading level and parental use of decoding strategies. Contains 27 references. (MM)

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# Parent Child Bookreading and Parent Helping Strategies

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In M.A. Evans (chair) Parent and Child Influences in Early Literacy Interactions. Symposium presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, March 1993, New Orleans, Louisiana.

As Hollis Scarborough has pointed out in her introduction there is a substantial body of research showing a positive relationship between children being read to by their parents in the preschool years and later literacy development. The belief that the practice of book reading with young children affects subsequent skill development is perhaps even more widely accepted in the educational community. Yet, as Scarborough has pointed out, the contributions of being read to appear to be quite modest. This is not to derogate the importance of being read to but rather to encourage us to be more inquiring in extrapolating from the research conducted this far. For example, one could postulate that reading to children may have many modest effects including enhancing children's attention span to text and school type learning (Rowe, 1991), language development, print related knowledge (Holdaway 1979, Snow 1983, Snow & Ninio 1986; Sulzby, 1985, Teale, 1981 1982, Wells, 1985) motivation and attitude towards books, and reading which as a package, provide a good basis for later academic learning. It could also be, as suggested earlier, that child characteristics drive the practice of being read to. A third possibility is that parental reading to pre-literate children is correlated with later parental practices when children are in school. Moon and Wells (1979), for example, reported that parental practices and the provision of resources for literacy development are even more important in accounting for children's progress in reading during the first two years of school than in the pre- -ool years.

Because of the substantial interest in parents' approaches to reading to their children, it might be expected that a similar substantial literature would exist on parental book reading with children who are formally learning to read in school. While several papers speak to the

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importance of parents listening to their children read (eg, Goldenberg, 1989; Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Hewison, 1988; Tizard, Schofield & Hewison, 1982; Rowe, 1991), with the exception of paired-reading studies, none of these studies documents what parents do as active listeners to their children's reading.

Parents have been observed to employ a variety of techniques when reading to their children which vary between families, are correlated with such factors as the age and developmental level of the child. (eg Ninio and Bruner; 1978; Heath, 1982; Teale, 1984.) and can impact on the benefits of book reading, particularly with respect to language development (Whitehurst et al, 1988.) Parallel phenomena should be addressed to book-reading when the roles are reversed, that is when the child is doing the reading and parents doing the listening. Widely different methods of teaching reading have been employed in grade one classroom (see for example Adams, 1991; Chall, 1983; Matthews, 1966) and parent behaviours might be expected to reflect these curricular variations. For example, some parents might be quite traditional in their approach, emphasizing sounding out strategies to help their child recognize words, while others might be more contemporary or "whole language" in their approach, placing emphasis on meaning and context, and readily supplying words to maintain the focus on meaning.

It will come as no surprise to members of the audience that controversy surrounds the teaching of reading, as researchers, educators and parents question which approach, or combination of approaches is most useful for beginning readers. The debate surrounding whole language and traditional approaches to teaching beginning readers has also reached the media, being described as "something of a cold war between educators who champion the "phonics" method and those who believe in the "whole language approach" (Clements, 1990). Thus one might expect that parents are unsure of how to help their children, feel pressured to help their children, hold varying views on how reading develops, and favour different approaches to helping their own children.

**The Present Study**

The present study represents a very modest start to addressing some of the issues just raised. It's purpose was to examine the approaches that parents use when reading with their children who are beginning readers. In particular we focused on how parents respond to their children's miscues and what general admonitions they provided in the course of hearing their children read.

We further explored whether their behaviours were related to the beliefs they held about beginning reading and to their child's current level of reading skill. Finally we were curious as to how similar parent and teacher views were. This was an exploratory study but we did have the following hypotheses:

1) Because whole language is a fairly recent teaching philosophy, we expected most parents would adopt a traditional "bottom-up" style in helping their child read, perhaps similar to what they themselves experienced in school. We expected them, for example to primarily provide sound clues, to model sounding out, and to point out letter details.

2)We expected divergence between teacher and parent views with the majority of teachers holding "top-down" views of reading and the majority of parents holding "bottom-up" views.

3) We expected that parental views about the nature of beginning reading would co-vary with their helping behaviours.

4) We hypothesized that children's reading skill would be positively correlated with more traditional helping behaviours. This hypothesis is consistent with the views of those who argue for the importance of teaching print-to sound correspondences and with the notion that in the course of becoming better readers, children gain better phonemic awareness skills to utilize phonetic strategies (Morais, Bertelson, Cary & Alegria, 1986; Treiman & Baron, 1981).

## Method

Subjects. The participating children were 20 middle-class grade one children from two boards of education in medium sized urban communities. One subject made virtually no reading errors and was dropped from the sample leaving 8 boys and ll girls, ranging in age from 5 years 10 months to 7 years, with a mean age of 6 years 6 months. The participating parents were 17 mothers and 2 fathers. Twelve participating teachers taught these children.

Procedure. Each parent child-pair was visited in the home and presented with four storybooks of ascending level of difficulty for beginning readers. The four books used were "Mud" by Wendy Cheyette Lewison (1990), "Watch Your Step, Mr. Rabbit" by Richard Scarry (1991), "Five Silly Fishermen" by Roberta Edwards (1989)" and "Wheel Away" by Dayle Ann Dodds (1989). Parents were instructed to help their child read the storybooks as they normally

would in a storybook reading session. An observer audio-taped each session and noted non-verbal behaviours such as pointing to words or pictures on sheets containing copies of the text of each book.

After the books had been read, the parent was given six coloured worksheets containing the items from the reading recognition subtest of the Peabody Individual Achievement Test - Revised for the child to complete. For each item, parents were given printed instructions for what to say and were encouraged to go on to the next item according to the 15 second limit suggested in the Peabody Individual Achievement Test manual.

Finally, parents and teachers completed a questionnaire designed to determine their approach to reading instruction at home. The questionnaire first required participants to reflect on the importance of different goals of reading instruction and different routes to word recognition and then to decide whether their view of reading was more top-down or bottom-up.

Transcription and Coding. The tapes were transcribed and all miscues (ie, incorrectly reading a word, or failing to read a word) were identified. All parent behaviours following each miscue were identified and coded into one of the following categories:

*Look again* having three subcategories

1) Look again: encouraging the child to try the word again without providing any explicit hint as to how to go about figuring out the word, (g. "You know that word," "Try that word again")

2) Running Start: rereading sentence to point of miscue

c) Saw it Before: pointing out previous instance of word.

*Sound Out* having four subcategories

1)Sound & Blend: encouraging the child to sound out word letter by letter

2) Analogy: pointing out analogous word or giving rhyming word

3) Sound Clue: giving single sound clue, or word part

4) Visual Detail: pointing out particular letter detail or word part

5) *Exaggerated Supply*: supplying the word with exaggerated pronunciation to highlight sound-letter correspondence

*Context*

1) General Context: drawing in information from outside the text as clue to word

recognition

2) Text Context: pointing out previous text as clue to word recognition

3) Picture Clue: pointing to part of illustrations as clue to word recognition

*Supply Word* having 2 subcategories

1) supplying the word immediately following miscue

2) supplying words following failure of other strategy

*Ignore*: ignoring the child's miscue,

**Results**

The children made a mean number of 26.12 miscues in the course of reading the books. This represented on average 19.3 percent of the words read. All but 2% of the children's miscues were followed by parental assistance. Therefore parents in this sample were very vigilant about their children's reading accuracy. Across all parents, assistance strategies were distributed as follows: 13.28 for encouragement to look again; 15.48 for highlighting context cues; 6.63 for modelling sounding out; 36.94 for giving sounding out clue, and 28.57 for supplying the word. In this last category, in 23% of these instances, parents supplied a word after another helping strategy had failed. Within the context category, the average percentage of using general information, text clues and picture clues were 2.88, 0.85 and 13.81 respectively.

The data were then sorted, according to whether participants indicated on the questionnaire that they take primarily a bottom-up or top down approach to beginning reading. As predicted the majority of parents, 11 of 19, took a bottom-up view while the majority of teachers, 10 of 12, took a top-down approach. Analyses of the children's reading skill by parent group revealed that the children of these two groups of parents did not differ in their mean number of miscues, percentage of miscued words, or PIAT-R word recognition scores. Analyses were also conducted to see whether any of the dependent variables varied as a function of sex. No significant sex effect was found for the children's reading scores or for any of the five types of parent helping behaviour. Therefore, sex was disregarded in any further analysis.

Because there was unequal variance between parent groups and some skewness in the percentages for some of the parent helping strategies, the data were subjected to a square root transformation. The MANOVA conducted on these transformed scores by parent group was

significant (Wilks' Lambda= $F(5,13) = 2.92$, $p < .05$). Univariate tests revealed that parents who reported a more top-down orientation used context cues more frequently than the parents who took a bottom-up approach, $F(1,17) = 8.95$, $p < .008$. Conversely, parents who took a bottom-up approach used more decoding strategies than did the parents who expressed a top down approach to reading, $F(1,17) = 6.28$, $p < .023$. Further univariate tests revealed that top-down parents more frequently directed their children's attention to picture cues, $F(1,17) = 8.38$, $p < .01$, and outside information cues, $F(1,17) = 5.06$, $p < .038$, whereas the use of textual cues did not differ between groups.

Correlational analyses revealed that for the most part, the five types of helping behaviours were uncorrelated, with the exception that the proportion of sounding out strategies was highly negatively correlated with the proportion of strategies highlighting context clues, $r = -0.77$, $p < .001$. Thus the extent to which parents encourage bottom-up or top-down approaches to the recognition of words within text appears to be a major distinguishing dimension of parent's style. In addition correlational analyses of children's reading scores with types of parent strategies revealed that poorer reading ability was positively associated with parents giving context cues, largely the use of picture cues. There was no significant correlation between the children's reading level and parental use of decoding strategies. Unfortunately, the sample size was not large enough to examine interaction effect between parent approach and child reading level.

**Concluding Comments**

The results of the present study supported the hypothesis that the majority of parents would view reading as a bottom-up process. Consistent with this belief, they frequently helped their children over miscues by helping them to sound out the miscued words. This type of assistance strategy was uncorrelated with children's word recognition scores on the PIAT-R, suggesting that regardless of children's reading level, parents encouraged children to focus on print-sound correspondence. Overall, 43% of their helping behaviours were of this type. This may be quite at variance with the approach taken in the classroom, in that 80% of the children's teachers indicated that they de-emphasized print-sound strategies. I sense that some parents became a little frustrated at their child not being able to sound up phonetically regular words and guessing for example "face" for "cheeks", on the basis of the illustrations and said "No, look

at the word" and then offered a beginning sound. This raises the question of whether consistency in parent and teacher beliefs and approaches might be important for children reading development, motivation, and attitude towards reading at home or at school.

The fewer parents who expressed a top-down view were distinctive in their behaviour in that they placed less emphasis on sounding out miscued words in favour of encouraging their children to guess on the basis of picture clues and general knowledge. This again demonstrates how beliefs may become translated into behaviour. Whether such parental beliefs and behaviours make a difference for the child should be studied.

Finally, it was also demonstrated that parents tended to use more context cues with children who showed poorer reading ability on the PIAT-R. This might be interpreted as speaking to parents' sensitivity and flexibility in helping children with poorer reading skills, in which more straightforward context clues--particularly picture clues-- were provided to children to give them a sense of reading.

In addition to the quantitative data regarding the assistance given following miscues, a number of qualitative observations were also made. Parents frequently offered explicit generalizations such as "Don't go too fast, because then you skip your words", or "Try to look at the pictures. The pictures sometimes can tell you what the word is" or "Sometimes there are silent letters" or "Look closely at the letters and words". They also seemed to anticipate difficulties and to offer a clue to word recognition before a given word was attempted. Finally they sometimes supplied not just the miscued word, but the rest of the phrase, or supplied the first word of the next sentence. These strategies would help to keep the story flowing.

The present study is limited in its generalizability by it's sample size, and it's failure to sample diverse populations. But it reminds us that the role of parents in literacy development does not stop when children are no longer in the emergent reading stage and that parents actively encourage certain ways of dealing with text. My hope is that this paper, and this symposium in general will encourage others to study parent and child contributions to literacy development.

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# Distribution of Helping Strategies
## All Parent Participants

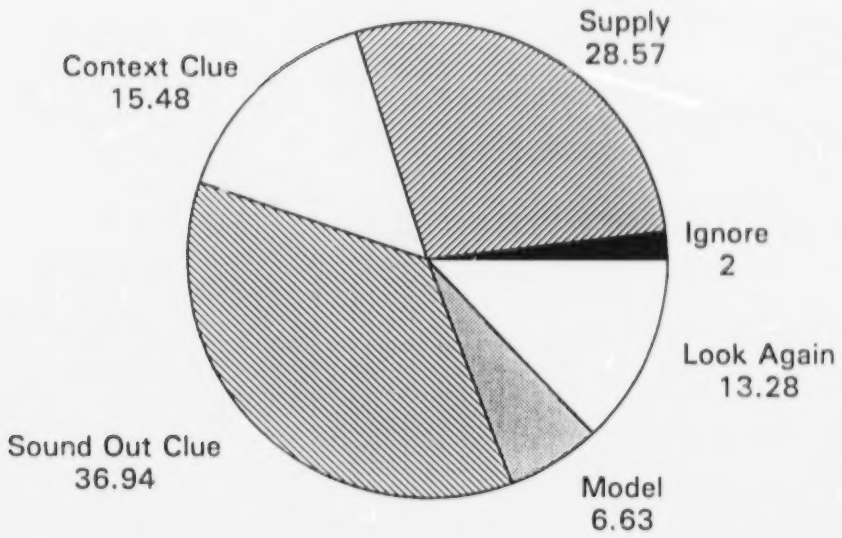
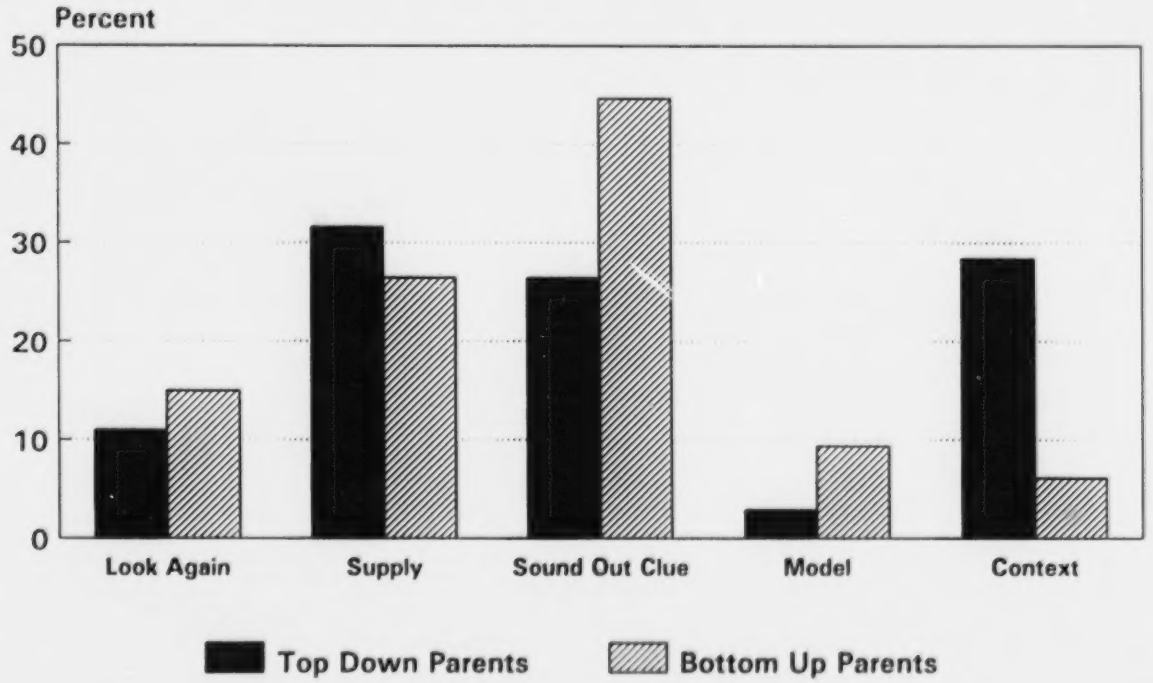


Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Percentage of Parent helping Strategies by Group

| | Group | |
|---|---|---|
| | Bottom Up | Top Down |
| **Parent Variables** | | |
| Look Again | 14.97 (11.77) | 10.96 (7.68) |
| Supply | 26.44 (14.40) | 31.50 (13.53) |
| Exaggerated Supply | 9.36 (16.03) | 2.88 (3.40) |
| Sound Out | 44.64 (10.73) | 26.35 (18.90) |
| Use Context | 6.13 ( 4.40) | 28.35 (27.99) |
| general | 1.04 ( 2.05) | 5.43 ( 5.95) |
| picture | 5.92 ( 6.11) | 24.66 (24.28) |
| text | .85 ( 1.91) | .85 ( 1.23) |
| **Child variables** | | |
| PIAT-R raw score | 23.17 (10.44) | 21.00 ( 7.26) |
| PIAT-R standard score | 99.36 (13.85) | 94.5 (12.52) |
| number miscues | 24.27 (11.550 | 28.66 (13.76) |
| % miscued words | 16.76 (11.27) | 22.79 (12.14) |

# Distribution of Helping Strategies
## By Parent Group



## INTERCORRELATION MATRIX FOR CHILD AND PARENT VARIABLES

| | %MISC | RPIAT | SSPIAT | SUPPLY | AGAIN | MODEL | SOUND | CONTEX | TEXT | GENERAL | PICTURE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| % MISCUED | 1.0 | | | | | | | | | | |
| RAW PIAT | -.59 | 1.0 | | | | | | | | | |
| SS PIAT | -.49 | .9 | 1.0 | | | | | | | | |
| SUPPLY | .04 | .07 | .20 | 1.0 | | | | | | | |
| LOOK AGAIN | -.27 | .28 | .44 | -.44 | 1.0 | | | | | | |
| MODEL | .42 | -.23 | -.14 | -.20 | -.14 | 1.0 | | | | | |
| SOUND OUT | -.42 | .39 | .32 | -.04 | .10 | .25 | 1.0 | | | | |
| CONTEXT | .23 | -.56 | -.46 | -.17 | 0.28 | -.30 | -.77 | 1.0 | | | |
| STORY | -.21 | -.02 | .01 | -.21 | 0.04 | .00 | .33 | .12 | 1.0 | | |
| GENERAL | .15 | .13 | .12 | -.44 | 0.06 | .02 | -.25 | .46 | .21 | 1.0 | |
| PICTURE | .33 | -.68 | -.56 | -.10 | -.30 | -.03 | .89 | .00 | .69 | .21 | 1.0 |